

Calhoun County Public Health Department

How To Avoid Foodborne Illness

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Foodborne illness affects over 76 million people in the United States each year including over 323,000 people who required hospitalization and 5,000 who died from what they ate or drank. As is the case with many illnesses, children, individuals who are immune compromised, and people over 50 years of age are most likely to be affected by foodborne illness.

To reduce your chances of being stricken with foodborne illness there are five major risk factors to consider.

- First and foremost is personal hygiene. If you are ill, especially with gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea or vomiting and are preparing or serving food, there is a great likelihood that illness will be passed along with your favorite dish. It is important to remember that for some illnesses, such as those caused by the Norovirus, infection can continue for two or more days after feeling better.

Relating to personal hygiene is hand washing. There is no such thing as washing your hands too many times. Hands should be washed every time you change a task while preparing food. Hand washing is critical not only after handling raw meats, liquid eggs, and trash, but before handling food that will be directly consumed. This includes preparing sandwiches and rolls, and handling uncooked fruits and vegetables. Hands should be thoroughly washed under hot, soapy water for at least 20-30 seconds. Is there a nail brush at the kitchen sink to clean under nails? Remember what is on your hands is also on your sandwich.

- The second risk factor relates to illnesses caused by contaminated food and equipment. Food can be contaminated in many different ways including incorrect refrigerator or freezer storage. Raw meats must always be stored below other foods to prevent Salmonella, E. coli, and a host of other bacteria and viruses from cross-contamination. Ready-to-eat, pre-cooked, and non-potentially hazardous food (e.g., lettuce, limes, etc.) should always be stored above other foods.

All foods contain some bacteria which can cause spoilage and possible foodborne illness. Refrigeration temperatures should be 41°F or less giving refrigerated food about seven days of shelf life. If there are packages of food in the refrigerator that you can't remember when they were put in there, it may be time to clean out the frig!

Preventing contaminated equipment can be an easy task. Food preparation equipment includes serving utensils, knives, can openers, cutting boards, even your kitchen counter. These can become contaminated from slicing meats or fresh fruits and vegetables, hands, or dirty dishes. The remedy is easy. Immediately before use, clean and sanitize utensils and equipment. This involves wiping surfaces with a soapy cloth then using a sanitizer such as Chlorox Wipes or chlorine product. This removes visible dirt and decreases the number of

dangerous germs on surfaces. Keep your dishcloth fresh, discard after use, or use a disposable product.

- The third factor is adequate cooking. Foods must reach an internal temperature adequate to kill pathogenic bacteria. Generally speaking beef should be cooked to 155°F, pork and fish 145°F, and poultry 165°F. Leftovers should also reach 165°F to be considered safe. It is not advisable to guess food temperatures, especially when “stab-point” probe thermometers are so easy to use and readily available. When selecting a thermometer, digital is preferred over the dial type because digital thermometers do not require confusing calibration. When checking food temperatures, always insert the thermometer into the thickest part of the food.

Whatever cooking method used, always remember the food must be brought to a safe temperature within two hours (e.g., poultry must reach a minimum 165°F temperature within two cooking hours or less).

- Factor number four is the proper holding food temperature. The old adage of “keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold” still holds true. Foods that have been cooked and are being kept hot should be at a minimum of 135°F (e.g., hot meatballs for a dinner party). Cold foods should be kept at 41°F or less. After a meal, hot food should not be allowed to cool at room temperature. Once food is found to be 135°F or less it should be rapidly cooled, in six hours or less, to 41°F. Hot foods (135°F) can be placed in the refrigerator to cool. Bacteria grow well at room temperature. As a matter of fact, bacteria double in number every 20 minutes when kept at temperatures between 135°F and 41°F.
- The last factor is whether the food came from a safe source. It is not a good idea to buy unlabeled clearance canned goods in damaged containers including bulging or dented cans. These defects can affect the quality of the food and potentially have serious health consequences. “If in doubt, throw it out” is a very good rule to follow.

In conclusion it can be fairly stated that good health relies on good judgment. Foodborne illness can be easily avoided by following the guidelines provided above and using common sense.

To obtain further information concerning food safety, please contact the Calhoun County Public Health Department at 269-969-6341.